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The Narrow Margin

*The Narrow Margin* is a cop thriller, released in 1952, centered on a witness, Mrs. Frankie Neall (Marie Windsor), who must be transported safely from Chicago to Los Angeles. She is the widow of a mob boss who is being escorted to speak before the grand jury. Professional hit men are after her, but do not know what she looks like. They do know what the cop, Detective Sergeant Walter Brown (Charles McGraw), looks like. As the hit men get more persistent, Brown has to get clever and stay one step ahead. In doing so, he puts in danger an innocent woman, Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White) and her son Tommy (Gordon Gebert).

*Narrow Margin* (minus the *The*) was released in 1990 and is a remake of *The Narrow Margin*. As a remake, it has almost the same story with almost the same characters. There are some differences, with some new characters added (such as the police chief and new detective), and some new story items (for example the girl escaping to the mountains to hide out and the chase scenes that follow). The newer film used better known actors for the time, for example, Gene Hackman. *The Narrow Margin* had used actors that were not well know and had limited previous acting work.

Why remake *The Narrow Margin*? The Art of Watching Films discusses the fact studios are looking to make a profit, and it is risky business to make an expensive film. So it is in their interest to make safe bets with remakes and sequels. If the original movie was liked by audiences, they will likely like the remake or sequel, regardless if the remake or sequel was actually any good or not. Here, *The Narrow Margin* was nominated for an Oscar for best writing. So its story is definitely good. Although it is considered a B-film, a motion picture that was intended for distribution as the less-publicized bottom half of a double feature . So *The Narrow Margin* wasn’t filmed to be arty or a block buster. It was just a low budget movie to provide entertainment. A comment made in class was they felt the movie was too short. They wanted to see more. The Wikipedia entry for B movie says that a B movie was supposed to be short, with the average running time to be about 70 minutes, which makes you think the B movie is inferior to the large budgeted headliners . So *Narrow Margin* (1990) can be seen as a solution to some of these issues with *The Narrow Margin* (1952). The 1990 version is longer, shot in color, and casted some big name actors. This movie was tweaked a bit for modern audiences with the addition of chase scenes, explosions, and plenty of guns shooting. Since it is a full length film (97 minutes), we get to see the court case ending, and the district attorney’s satisfaction in solving the case and putting away the bad guy. Interestingly, *The Narrow Margin* (1952) was certified as “Approved” in the USA and is pretty tame in terms of language and violence, compared to today’s standards. *Narrow Margin* (1990), on the other hand, is rated R, mostly for the violence. Here we see *Narrow Margin* (1990) has been updated to meet the audiences’ moral standards, which could tolerate much more violence on screen compared to the 1952 version and its audience.

Is *The Narrow Margin* (1952) truly a film noir movie? Our text, The Art of Watching Films, states a film noir is an American crime film . In *The Narrow Margin*, there is racketeering, corruption, and murder with the setting being mostly a train heading from Chicago to Los Angeles. The crime is used as a device in this movie to help the plot along, unlike in past films such as *Deep Red* or *Tenebre* where focus of the film was the gruesome crimes. The text also notes the city is “stylized at night, and documentary-like during the day” . At the beginning of the film, Brown and his partner are picking up Mrs. Neall. The style and mood is dark with long shadows (low-key shots). There are a lot of places for a hit man to lurk and hide. The train seemed in between, in some scenes, they are well lit, and in others they are dark. On the contrary, the scenes where the train stops at a station and the passengers get off to take a break, the scenes are brightly lit (high-key shots) and the dialog a bit more serious, like a documentary. The text mentions the detective character being “wry, cynical sleuth” and the “’innocent’ man tempted by luxury” . The detective in this film is cast off as possibly being crooked, and the story shows him being tempted with money to give up the girl he is supposed to protect. When the deal was being offered to give up Mrs. Neall, one reviewer said, “McGraw's hard-lined face, which here is a picture of incorruptibility, won't let us believe that he might make a deal” . The text also mentions the “range of theme” and “visual style” is “varied and complex” . The visual style changes based on where the story is, be it in Chicago, on a train, or in Los Angeles as well as what time of day it is. The theme changes added suspense to story and kept it interesting and entertaining. The shots on the train looked and felt cramped. The director, Richard Fleischer, expanded the scenery outside of the train by including window shots. For example, there were the shots of the suspicious car seen following the train through the window. There’s another scene where the train stops and there is another train on the other side of the tracks. Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White), the actual Mrs. Neall, is taken hostage by a hitman and locked in her compartment. Brown tries to force himself inside and is unable to. He recognizes she is in grave danger and ends up using the window reflection from the other train car as a mirror to see the action inside and stop it.

What do others think of *The Narrow Margin (1952)*? Film critic Blake Lucas says *The Narrow Margin* “reflects the ‘noir view’ of an unstable and deceiving moral reality” . The Wikipedia entry also states the critics and film historians view *The Narrow Margin* as “a classic example of the film noir genre” . Other critics reviewed seem to hold the same sentiment towards this film. Rotten Tomatoes gives the movie 100% from 6 votes . *The Narrow Margin* is considered to be the best B-film ever made.

And what do they think of *Narrow Margin* (1990)? It didn’t fair so well with reviewers. It only scores 70% on the Tomatometer. Roger Ebert states *Narrow Margin* is “a clumsy version of the Idiot Plot, dressed up as a high-gloss chase thriller” . Ebert had reviewed *Narrow Margin*, but a search for *The Narrow Margin* didn’t provide any results, meaning hasn’t reviewed *The Narrow Margin* and possibly wasn’t biased towards *Narrow Margin*. He also sites some issues with the story and dialog as well as hits upon a movie cliché theme in the 90’s, the use of a black actor as the main character’s superior, who as a character is “invariably wrong-headed and obtuse” . He says:

In the bad old days, black actors were often cast in menial roles. Now they are cast as token superiors, but the stereotyping is just as relentless. Why not let some of these actors into the mainstream of the plot?

However, Christopher Null of filmcritic.com states “it was an odd choice to remake a mediocre 1950’s noir” which shows the existing movie bias this critic has. He states the 1990 version of the film doesn’t generate much suspense and Hackman and Archer “never really generate much chemistry” . Null rated this film 3 out of 5 stars while Ebert gave it 1½.

Overall, *The Narrow Margin* was a low budget movie based on a great story with good acting and directing which resulted in an entertaining experience. It was interesting to discover this film was shot in 13 days and only a few seconds were aboard an actual train . The director used new technology, the handheld camera, to shot many of the train room shots, and to do so without taking apart the sets . I thought the sets seemed believable and hadn’t noticed that the train rocking motion was due to the movement of the camera, not the set. On the other hand, *Narrow Margin* (1990), executed the way it was I thought, was not as good as the original. I think it was missing movie chemistry which *The Narrow Margin* (1952) had. I think *The Narrow Margin* (1952) set out what it was to accomplish, which was to provide an enjoyable, suspenseful movie experience. The fact alone that the 1952 version left you wanting more was a good sign the movie was good, while there was a bit of relief when the 1990 version was over (it seemed to drag on). The Art of Watching Films mentions that due to bias of watching the first version of the movie, rarely will audiences like the remakes or sequels.

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